

## A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS AS A FEMINIST MANIFESTO

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### ABSTRACT

*The story of Ramayana is known to all and is retold several times. Every writer adds something new to the story and every reader grasps it according to his/her experiences and understanding. Although the story remains almost the same the values attached to it keep on changing with the passage of time. It is essential to understand a story according to the values of the age it has been read especially epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata have been used as moral teachings for ages. Often it is found that these stories are written by a male and morals and teachings are directly or indirectly imposed upon the women who are neither the writer nor the explainer of the story. Divakaruni has dealt with the well-known story of Ramayana but this time it is actually Sitayana; Sita's version of the story. This paper tries to find out the real meaning behind the various incidents of the story especially the incidents that have women included. According to Divakaruni, Ramayana while portraying Sita as an ideal wife, portrays Kaikeyi, Surpanaka, and Manthara as evil characters. But is it right to consider them evil when often in real life we do the same?*

**KEYWORDS:** *Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Sitayan, Patriarchy, Love & Betrayal*

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### INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American writer especially known for her unique depiction of female characters in her writings. She presents previously existing mythical characters with a tint of modernization to make the readers connect, understand, and empathize with them. Her portrait of Sita provides one to have a deep insight into the mythical ideal wife. In her writings, inner battles and happenings are as important as the outer ones. Everyone knows the story but it is perhaps the first time that readers are going to know the character. Divakaruni has dealt with great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Her novels do not revolve around the male protagonists like earlier versions of these epics rather these deal with the female protagonists and tell how they lived those stories.

*The Forest of Enchantments* is a new way to inspect the story of *Ramayana*; this time it is *Sitayana*. While *Ramayana* is the story of a male told by a male and tells the story of a great war between the two great male warriors of that time, *The Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of the story but this time it is a story told by a woman about a woman. It is not only a story about the battle between the two great male warriors but it is a battle of ideas; it is about the after-effects and side effects of males' decisions and actions upon the lives of women around them. This "Sitayana" gives words to many questions arising in the minds of women since eternity.

Sita is the protagonist of Divakaruni's version of the story of *Ramayana*. But this story is not limited to her only. Every female character represents a particular idea. Each of these characters raises a few questions or refutes preconceived notions attached to them; sometimes on their own and sometimes through the mouth of the

protagonist. “But as I dipped my quill into the inkpot, they rose inside me. Voices. Some clamoring, some tentative, some whispering, so that I had to still my breath to hear them. Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband’s jealous fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife of the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and her beloved son perish because of her husband’s obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventures with my husband.” (4)

Overall Divakaruni’s *Sitayana* makes the readers rethink and reflect on these questions; the questions though perhaps raised for the first time but were buried in every conscious mind that refuses to give up and surrender to the preconceived notions. Divakaruni wants to reconsider these characters which have been either used to dictate women the code of conduct or to frighten them with the possible ill fate they could be destined to if they don’t follow certain imposed rules. The protagonist writes her autobiography in the “red” colour ink as chosen by the sage Valmiki and finds it quite appropriate as it is “the colour of menstruation and childbirth, the colour of the marriage mark that changes women’s lives, the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree”. The mere beginning of the novel proves that it is going to be a feminist manifesto.

### **Sita, the Protagonist**

Sita has a feminist bent of thinking; she questions the way a woman is treated in society and how different are the rules of this world for a male and a female. She is different from the Sita we know or being admired for ages. She is the Sita that a modern woman feels connected with. She is a tragic heroine but never surrenders to the circumstances. She is not ready to accept what is not justifiable to her. We find a psychological portrait of Sita throughout the novel. She keeps on thinking, analyzing, and reflecting on whatever happens around her. She is a non-conformist and denies accepting old taboos imposed upon a person just because of being a woman. She is a curious mind and wants to know the reason for everything. She feels something unique about her and gets illusions/ hallucinations. She is divine and yet makes mistakes like a human. She is afraid of her getting older and not yet able to attain motherhood as Ram is not ready for that during their exile. Throughout the story it can be seen that males are choosing other males over females in their lives; be it Ram who chose forest to keep his father’s promise over the request of his mother to stay in Ayodhya or Laxman who chose to accompany his brother during exile over his newly wedded wife. Even it seems that Laxman is happy to go to the forest with his brother and share quality time with him, and considers Sita as a burden and reason to attract problems.

Sita’s character develops with the development of the story; Sita the daughter of earth turns into the daughter of fire. While earth is the symbol of patience and productivity, fire on the other hand has the potential to burn whatever comes in its way. Be it relations, social taboos, or herself, Sita can annihilate everything after her disillusionment with Ram. Sita is not only the mouthpiece of Divakaruni rather she represents all the women whether existing in her time or the present day. She is very empathetic and tries to put her foot in the shoes of the person in front of her whether that person is a friend or foe. She always tries to find out the reasons behind someone’s weird actions and tries to justify the act of that person. Through Sita, Divakaruni tries to analyse other female characters who either were painted in the shades of grey or were lost in oblivion. Her personality is multifaced and develops with the story. She is a daughter, a sister, a princess, a lover, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a queen, and a mother. Her character is portrayed as a woman of substance. She is devoted to the roles life has chosen for her and tries to be perfect. Her character develops and unfolds with the development of the story.

To write her story Sita needs to revisit the day she met Ram for the very first time and become “again the girl I’d been on that day, burnished with innocence, believing that goodness and love were armour enough”. (4)

### **Sita as a Divine being, an Incarnation**

She was a foundling whom the saint king Janaka found during a procession for the welfare of the state. The people of Mithila considered her “Amazing; miraculous...the earth-goddess herself, appeared straight out of the ground” (5) She often talks to the divine bow, a gift from Lord Shiva brought to her by Parashuram. The bow indirectly tells her that she is not a common earthly being rather she is divine. “Once it told me that I wasn’t a woman at all. ‘What am I then?’ ‘A goddess, obviously.’” (28) She often hears a voice coming from within. The voice not only guides us but warns and protects her also. Sita considers the voice as the voice of the goddess residing in her soul. Several glimpses of hallucinations and dreams indicate that she is an incarnation of the goddess Laxmi herself.

### **As a Lover of Nature, a Healer (Eco-Feminism)**

Sita often gets attracted to the enchanting and mysterious life of nature especially forests. She finds a strange connection with forests and its habitats. Sita somewhat gets attracted towards the forest as the sleeping beauty towards the needle of the spin. She feels her whole being and fate connected to it. There is the presence of forest throughout her life once she leaves Mithila. This connection shows a tint of eco-feminism. In the story, both nature and women have been depicted as misused by men. She feels the nature she is being surrounded by and can easily empathize with its creatures and feel their feelings and pain even if it is a demon killed by Ram or Surpanakha, the female demon mutilated by Laxman. Sita had a deep love for nature and considered trees, animals, and even demons as people of the cities called them an inalienable part of nature, and to hurt them was to hurting the mother nature herself. Sita is portrayed as the daughter of mother earth and then the daughter of the god of fire, both of these are components of nature.

### **As a Lover and Beloved Wife**

Although Sita didn’t want to marry and dreamt of a life of a spinster but with Ram, it was love at the first sight. She felt deeply connected with Ram and lead her life as a true friend and adviser to her husband. She not only leaves the charm of the palace but voluntarily accepts all the hardships of a forest life just to be in the company of her husband. But she had to face continuous betrayals and heartaches by her husband whom she loved the most. Sita led a lonely life amid the demons of Lanka just remembering Ram. She was even ready to face death rather than accepting the tempting proposal of being the head queen of Lanka. She was shocked to find out that all her hardships resulted in a pyre waiting for her to prove her loyalty to her husband. “But he didn’t touch me. And when I, pushing all shyness aside, not caring what the crowd might think, reached for his hands, he took a step back and crossed his arms....When Ram spoke, there was no anger in his voice. There was no feeling at all. It was steady and impartial and uncaring, and so unlike my husband’s that had I not been standing right in front of him, I wouldn’t have believed that it was him speaking....Ravan abducted you from my home. You’ve lived in his palace for a year now. Who knows what kind of relationship you’ve had with him—”(241-242) When she tried to prove her innocence, Ram rejected all the proofs and logic provided by her. “ ‘What do you say may well be true,’ the man who was non longer my beloved Ram said in his iron voice. ‘But your words are not proof enough. Not for the citizens of Ayodhya. I cannot take back to them a queen whose virtue they’d question, whose purity they’d disbelieve....Ram’s words, spoken so calmly, piled around me like ice. They froze my blood. Yet strangely, they gave me strength. Because what could happen to me worse than what Ram had just done by doubting my virtue In front of the entire

populace? By rejecting me because of what his subjects might whisper?”(243)

Sita tried to make Ram understand that his decision of discarding her might result in further exploitation of women by their husbands and society as well. But Ram was not willing to drop his idea. Sita felt humiliated and “wanted to sink into the ground, to become one with the earth”. She thought how, for her husband, her “needs came after that of even the lowest of the citizens of Ayodhya.” (244) She felt devastated but for the sake of her love for Ram she entered into the flame. “Heat blistered my skin, burnt away my eyebrows. While everyone stared in horror or cried out to me to stop—everyone except my husband—I stepped into the blaze.” (245)

The heartache and betrayal didn't stop there only, Sita had to face that again and again. Ram once again banished her without even asking her to prove her innocence. He even didn't tell her that she had been discarded. It was only Laxman by whom she learned that she had been deported to the forest due to fake claims of the citizen of Ayodhya. “ ‘Not a week,’ Lakshman said. ‘The rest of your life. Ram is banishing you from his kingdom.’”(313) Sita became furious to know the fact and said, “ ‘So he banished me because a few people are gossiping? People always talk. Should an elephant turn around and run away because dogs are barking?’ “ (316) Once again Sita was heartbroken and mistrusted. She was unable to accept the truth; she was unable to accept how come her husband do that to her. She is broken for Ram “ ‘...didn't trust me, Lakshman. My husband, whom I trusted from the very moment my father put my hands in his. My husband, whom I believed in through the darkest night of my despair in Lanka. My husband, whom I forgave even after his harsh words on the battlefield in Lanka gave me no choice but to throw myself into a fire. My husband, to whom the gods themselves proclaimed my innocence. That husband has discarded me like an old sandal....But he's the real betrayer. Who's going to sentence him?’ ” (317) Sita tried a lot to forget Ram and his memories but his “memory was a bruise that might never fade”. (322) She indulged herself in the ashram's chores and the upbringing of her sons. As time passed she thought that now she had made herself strong enough to bear the pain but the moment she heard Ram's name, the pain surfaced again. “ ‘I thought I'd grown an armour strong enough by now to deal with it. How wrong I was. His name sent a sharp stab of pain through me, worse than anything I'd experienced during the birthing.’ ” (329) Her character shows how women go on bearing and suffering the pain given by their loved ones and are always ready to forgive and accept them the moment they see them. That's the agony; a woman is ill-treated by loved ones as forgiveness is so easy to get.

### **As a Woman of Substance, a Revolutionary**

Sita's character goes on raising questions against social taboos and patriarchy. She wants to lead her life as a spinster and rule over Mithila as there is no male heir. But her mother tells that it is not possible. “ ‘Even if you were a goddess among women,’ ... The kingdom of Mithila can be ruled only by a man. This has been the custom of the country since before the scribes began to write its history.’ ” (14) When Sita asks “Why can't customs change... Especially ones that don't make sense”, her mother replies, “ ‘Not this one. Because it's built upon an age-old belief the citizens of Mithila hold: no woman is strong enough—or wise enough—to guide them’ ”. (14) not only the women in the ancient world but great ladies like Rajiya Sultana and the Rani Laxmibai also had to face these patriarchal norms. In the whole history of mankind, especially in India, there are very rare examples of kingdoms led by women as they were considered to be supportive to the males only. A woman's dignity lied in service and sacrifices only and whenever they tried to ask for their rights they were considered evil. There are so many instances of intelligent women being burnt alive calling as witches just because they tried to question the dominance of patriarchy.

### **As a Fighter**

She is an independent and free soul. She has desires and dreams like any common woman. She is extraordinary in her treatment of nature. She has a deep understanding of people. She is generous and fierce at once. She possesses an indomitable spirit that does not bow in front of evils. She is a fighter; a phoenix that rises from its ash. She is dynamic and mistress of her spirit. She is a romantic and likes to take flights of imagination.

The last scene of the novel brings the climax and message of the story. Sita was expected to enter the flames again to prove her piousness. It was the last exam she had to face and then she was destined to live a majestic life in the palace of Ayodhya. Everything looks so simple to others but for Sita, it was the time to take a stand, not for herself but for the generations to come. She decided that she would not enter the flames nor would she return to the ashram she lived for so many years. “ ‘No’, I say. ‘ I will not run away. I’ll meet Ram, just as he wishes. But not like this, dressed up as a queen. Because I’m not a queen any longer. I’m Sita, the forest dweller, Sita, daughter of earth. And yes, Sita, daughter of fire as well.’ ”(352) Sita, the protagonist, gives her speech and questions the validity of Ram’s decision: “O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you’ve always placed your role as a king ahead of your role as a husband...I ask you this, for I’ve been a citizen of Ayodhya too: Did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered?....Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced to a life of hardship, perhaps even death, in the wilderness?....You care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, did you think of the impact of your actions would have on the women of the city?”(356) She further says, “But I must refuse. Because if I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren’t guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And the society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. I can’t do that to them. For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking to me....I bless my daughters, who are yet unborn. I pray that, if life tests them—as sooner or later life is bound to do—they’ll be able to stand steadfast and think carefully, using their hearts as well as their heads, understanding when they need to compromise, and knowing when they must not....this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!”(356-357)

### **Other Female Characters-**

Through Sita, Chitra paints many shades of love; love between the same people in different situations how it changes and what forms it takes; how it becomes the greatest joy or strength, and how it snatches everything and dooms one to the darkest chambers of sorrow and how often it becomes the reason of both at the same time and yet we are not able to discard it cause it is in the very essence of us. Sita during the retelling of her story tells the stories of other female characters who were stricken by the weapon of love. These women tried their best to be true to their loved ones but little mistakes acted as bolts from the blue and changed their destinies. When Sita was banished to the forest by her beloved husband Ram, she watched a dream in the ashram. “ In the dream, too, I was surrounded by women. They walked around me with soundless measured steps. They looked at me with wise and compassionate eyes, eyes that had known suffering. Some I recognized: Sunaina, Ahalya, Mandodari, Sarama, Kaikeyi...Tara...Shabari. Why, even Surpanakha was among them, a rare calm veiling her mutilated face. Endure, they seemed to say. Endure as we do. Endure your challenges.”(322) Most of these women were bound to suffer silently the pain given by their loved ones. It was not considered dignified to revolt but to endure the pain destined to them. Sita talks about these minor or unacknowledged characters. She says, “...the pages I’d written in my lonely darkness, out of the need to give voice to all of us who were, blessings and curses.” (334)

### **Ahalya, the Ideal Wife**

Ahalya, as the scriptures said, was created by Brahma himself and was married to Gautam, one of the great sages of the time. The story of Ahalya is often used just to show the divine side of Ram or to dictate loyalty to wives. But indirectly it gives males a right over females to judge them without even listening to their version of the incident. Sita was asked to enter the flames by the same husband who knew the story of the innocence of Ahalya, it seems that The character of Ram learned nothing from the incident and repeated the same with his loyal wife. In our society also women have to suffer the same things again and again although there are a lot of examples showcasing the side-effects of misjudgment. Through Sita, the writer tries to give a sneak-peek of Ahalya's mind after what had happened to her.

The portrayal of Ahalya shows the unacceptance of the trial and sentence laid upon her. Sita finds her "silent, as though the stillness of stone had taken over her being." (131) but as our society, her husband was not able to have the meaning of her silence and thought that she had taken a vow of silence for some spiritual gain. But Sita finds out that the truth was different from what Gautam was thinking. "Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a sudden movement. Ahalya, who was on her way to the kitchen, had stopped and turned. She was looking directly at me, and if I read her glance right, it indicated that her husband didn't know the truth. That he didn't understand her at all." (131) That night after meeting with Ahalya, Sita dreamt of the scene when Ahalya turned back into a woman and finds no joy on her face to become a human again or to be alive in this world. "Finally she put her hand in his. But she didn't smile, and she didn't look at him. Was it then she decided that she'd punish him rest of her life by never speaking to him again, so he'd always remember what he'd done. They receded into mist, leaving me with another lesson: once mistrust has wounded it mortally, love can't be fully healed again." (135-136)

The story of Ahalya raises many questions: how rightful it was for Gautam to punish Ahalya when she herself was betrayed; how rightful it was that Gautam didn't get any punishment for what he did with Ahalya; how right it was that Ram learned nothing from this incident and did the same with his wife, and how right it is that the society considers it normal and even tries to idolise the incident?

### **Kaikeyi, the Universal Symbol of Evil and Overambitious Stepmother**

Kaikeyi was considered as the root cause of all the misfortune forced upon Ayodhya. She was painted as a greedy woman who asked for two boons bestowed upon her by her husband Dashrath, the then king of Ayodhya. Although she received the boons but those did not bring positive fruits to her as she had planned. She was left alone lonely in the same anger chambers she used to extort her boons. She was reduced to just a widow and a mother discarded by her loving son for whom she did all the wrongs. The society blamed her and considered her as a misfortune but Sita while speculating on the incidents that happened in her life tried to find out how wrong was Kaikeyi. "Were Kaikeyi's actions, which sprang from love for her son and her desire to secure the kingdom for him, that much worse? She hadn't hurt me any more than Ram had. If I could forgive him, could I not forgive her?" (286) Although Kaikeyi was considered as the root cause of all the pain and misfortunes Sita was doomed to bear, Ram hurt her more than anyone else. Kaikeyi tried to do good for her son but Ram asked Sita, his beloved wife, to enter the flames questioning her piousness and loyalty, and banished her when she was pregnant. How many times a woman needs to prove her innocence for the same incident again and again and especially when it was not even her fault.

### **Surpanakha, the Enchantress**

Surpanakha was considered as the person behind Sita's abduction and her further pains. It was Surpanakha who invoked and encouraged Ravan to kidnap Sita and finally became the reason for his downfall. Sita, although sometimes furious, did not consider her evil. When Surpanakha came to woo Ram, Sita did not like that. She "wanted to feel offended. But there was something innocent and natural in her movements, like a peacock preening itself in mating season." (144-145) Sita pitied to find that the men were mocking Surpanakha who "had gone beyond the norms of maidenly behaviour, offering herself in this manner to a man she barely knew, but perhaps the rules of conduct were different for asuras. In any case, she didn't deserve to be taunted." (148) It was not a shock for Surpanakha only but for Sita also when Laxman cuts her nose and ears. Sita was unable to find any rightful cause behind such a rude reaction from Laxman. "I watched, frozen with shock, as blood cascaded down Surpanakha's face, her eyes full of disbelief that someone could do such a thing to her when all she'd offered him was love." (149) There were so many other means to stop or punish Surpanakha as Laxman was a great warrior but mutilating a woman's face could not be considered a righteous thing. It was not Laxman but Sita who had to pay for what he did to Surpanakha.

Sita met Surpanakha in Lanka also and found that all the joy and innocence from her face had vanished forever. Surpanakha was full of disgust when she met Sita again in Ayodhya in the disguise of her sister-in-law. She trapped Sita with her black magic and sowed the seed of mistrust in the heart of Ram. She cursed Sita out of her pain: " 'Live on, Sita. Live without love, as I've been forced to. See how it feels to lose everything you cherish. I'll give you a hint: you'll long for death.' She grinned fiercely at me through tears, and then she was gone." (295)

### **Manthara, the Conspirer**

Manthara was a loyal servant and caretaker of Kaikeyi who cared for her since her birth. She came to Ayodhya when Kaikeyi got married to king Dashrath. It was Manthara only who plotted against Ram's coronation and invoked Kaikeyi to ask for her long-promised boons. Sita found nothing evil in Manthara as whatever she did was out of her motherly love and care for Kaikeyi.

### **Urmila, the Forgotten Wife**

Urmila was an unsung heroine, a devoted sister, and a loyal wife but was underrated by her husband. She sacrificed and bear the pain in silence. She fell in love with Laxman at the first sight and dreamt of a happy future with him but found that Laxman was more loyal to Ram than to his wife. Laxman did not give a single thought to what would happen to Urmila during his exile. He forgot the seven pheras and vows in front of fire and society. Laxman was idolised as an idol brother but what about the duties of a husband towards his wife. During seven vows a couple ensures dignity and loyalty to each other. But in reality, often a male is considered superior and ideal if he ditches his female counterpart to please other family members. Then why this drama of seven pheras and vows if following these in real life is not considered mandatory and of no real values. Don't these have any value in front of love and duty towards father, brother, and society? Society wants a woman to perform all her vows towards her husband, even it wants more and more sacrifices from her in form of duties. She must be always ready to accept and follow her husband however wrong he had done to her but it is not the same with a woman; she will never be forgiven for even a single, silly mistake. A woman's vows during the wedding cover all the groom's family indirectly but in the case of the groom, he is considered an ideal man if he forgets all those vows for sake of his family and relatives.

### **Mandodari, the Queen**

Mandodari was a true friend and adviser to her husband but was not given heed by the egoistic Ravana. Mandodari considered Sita as her long forbidden and banished daughter who was a bad omen to her father. She knew that if that was true Ravana should not try to woo Sita as she was his daughter as well as the reason for the downfall of his kingdom even his death. When in his fury Ravana tried to kill Sita, Mandodari said, “I call upon you to remember who you are—ruler of the greatest kingdom on earth, vanquisher of Indra, a devotee of Shiva, learned in all Vedas. Act with the dignity appropriate to your station....As your greatest well-wisher and mother of your firstborn, I beg this boon of you.’ She kneeled in front of him, hands joined in prayer.” (203) Although Sita refused to accept Mandodari as her mother Mandodari was firm about her belief. She was terrified to tell Ravana the truth but tried her best to save Sita from every danger. She was trapped between the love for her daughter and fear of her husband’s anger if he would know the truth. Remembering about an incident in the Ashoka Vatika Sita writes, “Mandodari, too, sent me a glance as she left. It was quick and covert and complicated, but I saw the mingled love and pain and horror in it, and I understood. Whatever the truth of my birth might be, in Mandodari’s mind, I was her long-lost daughter, her cherished and guilty secret.”(204)

Sita writes about the love and bonding shared by Mandodari and Ravana. She says that it was true that according to the culture and tradition of those days Ravana had many queens and women in his palace. Maybe Mandodari would have felt ditched by Ravana at times but “she continued to love Ravana, no matter how many women he brought to Lanka.” (204) although Ravana had relations with so many women at his death it was only Mandodari who was accompanying him and Ravana also wanted to spend his last moment with his wife. “Seeing them like this, I realized something: although Ravan had countless wives and concubines, although he had been obsessed with me to the point of ruination, it was only Mandodari, wife of his youth, whom he truly loved.” (231)

Sita had portrayed Mandodari as a strong woman who was loyal to her husband till his last breath. For sake of Ravana, she decided not to cry even seeing him dying. “Mandodari remained silent. I could tell she was trying to contain her grief, not wanting to stress Ravan further by breaking down in front of him. She would cry, I was sure, for days to come, for maybe the rest of her life, for her darling son. And for her husband, because—such is love’s irrational pull—she loved him in spite of all the grief he’d caused her. But for now, she was determined to be strong for his sake.” (232)

The character of Mandodari shows that society wants women to be loyal to their husbands however disloyal they are to them. So many women in the story were questioned for their loyalty but no one raised a single question about the loyalty of their partners. This hypocrisy is a big reason behind the exploitation of women since the ages.

### **Sarama, the Lonely Soul Amid her People-**

Sarama is a minor character and is often less talked about. She is the wife of Vibhisana who took refuge of Ram after being banished from Lanka. She often comes to meet Sita and tells about the whereabouts of the war. Remembering her Sita writes, “Her face was filled with sorrow, for no matter who won, forever to asuras her husband would be known as Vibheeshan the Traitor.” (216) Sarama lead a lonely life among her people due to Vibhisana who was the reason behind her biggest grief, the death of her only son Taranisen. “‘Vibheeshan must have told him,’ Sarama said. She had fainted at the news, but now she was calm, a statue of ice. ‘Only Vibheeshan knew the secret of his death.’ I realized that even if Ram won the war and Vibheeshan was made king of Lanka and she the queen, Sarama would never forgive her husband for this betrayal.” (222) She became queen of Lanka but that was not able to soothe her soul. She got ready for the



coronation ceremony but "her kajal-rimmed eyes were still filled with loss. I guessed that would never change. What good is a kingdom when you have no one to leave it to?" (229) She became the new queen of Lanka whose foundation was laid on the bodies of her people, and it was only curse and tears that came in her part. Her people were looking at her with disgust: "Look who's talking. The traitor's wife!.... Sarama stood so still, I thought she'd been turned—like Ahalya—into stone. Only her eyes glittered with unshed tears....and I realized, with a twinge in my heart, that that part of our relationship was over." (230)

### **Sunaina, the Lady**

Sunaina is Sita's foster mother. She has been portrayed as an intelligent and strong lady. She is accomplished in political affairs. She is an advisor and consort of her husband and helps him in taking administrative decisions although only in their private chambers as a society will not accept a woman's ideas. She is very much concerned about her daughters especially Sita and tried to make her ready for everything she would have to face in her life. She is foresighted and beware Sita about the women of her in-laws' house. She at times makes Sita aware of the ground reality of our society. In a way, she is a very practical woman.

### **Kaushalya, Tired of Fate**

Kaushalya is a forgotten wife and the possible reason behind Ram's one-wife-only vow. She is destined to live a tragic life. She had to lose her firstborn, her only daughter as Dashrath decided to give her to his friend. She lives a lonely life in her chambers as her husband is attracted towards Kaikeyi only. Although Dashrath doesn't show any interest in her still she is loyal to him and longs for his company. First, she had to lose her daughter and husband and now she is forced to lose her only son and loving and caring daughter-in-law also. She has accepted her fate a very long time ago and does not see any miracle happen.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Divakaruni through Sita has portrayed the women of India in all their colours rather one should say that it is a portrayal of the women of the world. Sitayana urges women to ask questions about the validity of the age-old values imposed upon them. It preaches that it's not right to consider a woman evil if she does not follow a certain taboo as these taboos are based on preconceived notions and are not realistic. The women painted in the story have to tell a part of their own and why they did a certain thing. In our normal life, we all do the same things but condemn others for the same behavior. Through Sita, Divakaruni questions patriarchy and the values assigned by that. Sita should not be seen only as a devoted wife who sacrificed her whole being for her husband, rather she should be admired for the woman she was. The character of Sita should not be imposed upon women to ask them for repeated sacrifices. The character of Sita portrayed by Divakaruni is the character with which a modern woman can correlate. This Sita is a symbol of intelligence, love, and courage, the values a woman needs to survive in the modern world.

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